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ABSTRACT

In addition to the conventions of standard written English, writing involves difficult choices of theme, audience, and form, as well as subtleties of style, and the teaching of writing requires active involvement of instructor and student in the learning process of each discipline. In a program involving cross-curriculum writing instruction at Beaver College, three or four liberal arts faculty members, one of whom is in English, work together in a course cluster for a semester to improve writing in their classes. They discuss ways to make writing a natural part of each class meeting and consult with each other on improving responses to student writing. Students get needed practice in writing: learn to express what they know first to themselves and then to others: learn to think and write in the special ways that humanists, social scientists, and scientists think and write when they are discovering and communicating ideas in their fields: and improve class discussions. Faculty members become more sensitive to their own similarities and differences as thinkers and writers, begin to pose questions about academic discourse and the nature of evidence in various fields, and begin to explore forms of literacy beyond the verbal. (AEA)

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WRITING, LEARNING, AND THINKING AT BEAVER COLLEGE

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What is writing across the curriculum? The phrase was first coined by Nancy Martin and her associates in the British Schools Council Project, which was designed to apply the work of James Britton to classroom situations. Martin's book, Writing and Learning Across the Curriculum, 11-16, makes a persuasive case for writing as a way of learning all academic subjects.

I heard the phrase, "writing across the curriculum," before I saw Martin's book, which is still published only in England by Ward Lock Educational. I must confess that the mental image still conjured by that phrase is that of a mischievous or desperate adolescent writer, magic-marker in hand, scribbling across the twelfth-grade curriculum guidebook.

That such secondary school curriculum guidebooks deserve such defacement is not the point. The point is that the phrase "writing across the curriculum"--and in this CEA session--"writing across the university"--evokes a variety of misconceptions, from graffitti to grammar to grantsmanship.

At Beaver College, we have a sizeable federal grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, to create a liberal arts college committed to teaching writing in all parts of the curriculum. But the grant was won only after all the fundamentals of the program were already in place. A program of writing across the curriculum depends on the way faculty members inside and outside the English department perceive the writing and learning processes. The success of our program at Beaver College has been based on the capacity of faculty, administration, and students to perceive that writing across the curriculum does not mean grammar across the curriculum or even verbal skills across the curriculum but more generally an emphasis across the curriculum on composition--an arrangement of fragments into a meaningful whole.

Too often universities and colleges live up to their cynical definition expressed by one wag as "a group of warring departments held together by a central heating plant." The Beaver College program in writing across the curriculum has helped us to compose our factions as well as our sentence fragments. But we first had to get over a number of misconceptions.

The first misconception is the "Myth of the Four Noble Truths"--the idea that the English department keeps in its safe a simple list of grammatical principles that they refuse to share with the rest of the faculty. If they would just ditto up these noble truths, then everyone on the faculty could help students to write more readable and less annoying papers. In December 1975, when the infamous Newsweek cover story announced that Johnny couldn't write, the person who was then the Dean of Beaver College believed in the Myth of the Four Noble Truths. In 1975, I was coordinator of the freshman English program. Those of you who have held that title yourselves know that the freshman director is by tradition the newest and most vulnerable person in the department, as is appropriate for a position that carries overwhelming responsibility and absolutely no power. (That is why present and past freshman coordinators all over the country owe an incalcuable debt to E. D. Hirsch of the University of Virginia for lending his personal power and prestige to that position.)

In December 1975, as coordinator of Beaver's freshman composition program, I was summoned to the office of a rather flamboyant Dean, who threw the magazine at me and asked me what I was going to do about the national crisis in general and its manifestation at Beaver College in particular. As I said, this Dean believed in the Myth of the Four Noble Truths, and he was putting me under

orders to share them with the whole faculty. Fortunately, we had already established an Educational Policy Committee subcommittee to investigate the college-wide writing requirement, so I felt some safety in numbers. My first task was to convince my colleagues on this subcommittee--an anthropologist and a psychologist, that writing involved much more than the surface features of punctuation, spelling, and standard usage. Thus, I would not circulate a list of truths that would improve something so complex as writing, which involved difficult choices of theme, audience, and form, as well as subtleties of style, in addition to a necessary conformity to the conventions of standard written English.

You may be surprised to learn that a definition of writing strictly in terms of its surface features was ~~not~~ held only by faculty members outside the English department, but was held by a few literary scholars as well. Within the English department, the myth had another name. My colleagues knew that there was no simple way to teach writing,--in fact some of them believed that there was probably no way to teach writing--so they did not fall prey to the Myth of the Four Noble Truths. But many of them, in their despair over teaching what they considered an art, did believe that the only teachable part of the writing process was defined in terms of fixing up the surface infelicities of a finished product. My colleagues trapped themselves by their limited definition of teaching composition. By defining writing as a mechanical skill, they guaranteed that their teaching of composition would bore them inconsolably and embitter them as they considered how the light of their graduate education was spent. Yearning to teach literature, they were impatient, frustrated, and unhappy with their composition courses. When blamed by their colleagues for the Newsweek writing crisis, these literary

scholars tactlessly demanded that everyone had better help with the dirty work or shut up. These literary scholars thus espoused the second misconception that stands in the way of a successful college-wide writing program. They believed in the Myth of Cinderella. They saw the teaching of writing as a menial task--dirty work. They forgot the lesson of Tom Sawyer and his fence. If English department members think that the teaching of writing is a menial task, so will everyone else. If English department members think that the teaching of writing is a stimulating intellectual activity, others will think so, too. Fortunately, a few people inside and outside the English department were becoming scholars of composition. This group inspired the others to see that the teaching of writing is scholarly, not scullery.

But we had no sooner laid to rest the Myth of the Four Noble Truths and the Myth of Cinderella, when the third misconception took visible form--the Myth of Empire. The Myth of Empire is built on a contradiction, so it should not be difficult to dispel. But like so many self-contradictory myths, it is unpredictably stubborn. On the one hand, faculty members fear that a college-wide emphasis on writing will give disproportionate power to the English department, especially in the form of increased F.T.E.'s. Somehow the idea has to sink in that if the rest of the college dumps all writing problems on the English department, <u>then</u> there will be a much greater chance of English department elephantiasis. If, on the other hand, faculty members in all departments take some responsibility for the teaching of writing, then the English department can stay an acceptable size. Sometimes the same faculty members who believe in the Myth of Empire also object to doing what they perceive as "the English department's job." Usually, this paradox can be resolved by recognizing that these same faculty members are probably falling

back into the Myth of the Four Noble Truths and believing that writing is defined strictly in terms of its surface features. A gentle reminder of the idea of writing as a global activity is in order here.

At Beaver, we began dispelling misconceptions informally--at lunch, over coffee. But we also tried a few formal procedures. A few of us who were doing research in composition presented our work at Faculty Forums, cocktail-hour meetings, during which faculty members present their research-in-progress for the enlightenment and entertainment of their peers. The composition staff also did one simple, inexpensive thing that bought more than its share of good will: we mimeographed the Table of Contents of our required cross-disciplinary freshman reader and distributed this list to the whole faculty with a cover memo asking for advice on which of the non-literary essays would be most useful for the composition staff to select for instruction. Asking colleagues for advice is always more effective than demanding that they do something for you.

We also initiated the procedures that would develop later into our course cluster arrangements. Beaver College course clusters are designed primarily for faculty development, although a secondary goal of curriculum integration is also being achieved. Three or four faculty members, one of whom is in English, decide to work together for a semester to improve writing in their courses. The team meets to discuss ways to make writing a natural part of each class meeting. Team members also consult with each other on improving responses to student writing. Frequently, students who are enrolled in more than one course in a cluster will be invited to do a major written project which is applicable in both courses. The student may then submit an early draft to one instructor and a later draft to a second. The student thereby

receives commentary from two professionals, while the instructors learn about responding to writing from seeing the comments of colleagues on earlier drafts.

One four-person faculty team included an historian who was teaching Modern European History, an anthropologist and a biologist who were team-teaching Human Evolution, and an English instructor teaching Major British Writers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Classes were scheduled at different times so that interested students could take two or more courses in the cluster during the same semester. The faculty team members were careful to avoid forcing a false thematic integration on the three courses in the cluster. The idea was that the courses should touch at specific points without overlapping in contrived ways. Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species was selected as the one common reading that would help to link the three courses. Perspectives on this text from four different disciplines had the serendipitous effect of stimulating each faculty member to look at his whole course from a fresh point of view. The students who took more than one course in the cluster were helped to make connections between liberal arts disciplines. But even those students who were signed up for a single course benefited from the guest lectures presented by other faculty team members and from the new point of view that each instructor brought to his own course.

The first cluster has served as a model for other faculty teams to plan uncontrived thematic coordination. Each subsequent team has established a few thematic points of contact, so that the Beaver College course cluster preserves the autonomy of each course in a coordinated arrangement. An appropriate image for the cluster is suggested by D. H. Lawrence's Women in Love--"stars in equilibrium," not colliding planets but stars in a state of balance and mutuality.

It was in the spirit of consulting together and seeking advice from each other that we conducted our first faculty writing workshop during January 1977. We did not have an NEH grant at this time. Nonetheless, twenty faculty members from a variety of departments voluntarily attended a two-week workshop conducted during the break between the fall and spring semesters. The workshop was conducted four mornings per week for three hours each morning. The twenty participants included the chairpeople from psychology, political science, and English. Several others were senior people, who, for a long time, had been in a classroom only to preside.

At this first workshop, all the aforementioned myths surfaced along with two others that I will call the Myth of the Magistrate and the Myth of the Martyr. According to the Myth of the Magistrate, all examples of student writing must be graded, evaluated, or otherwise judged by the instructor, who is the only certified magistrate of such activities. In every workshop, beginning with that first one, two and a half years ago, we have emphasized that responding to student writing is as important as judging it. One of the most perceptible changes at Beaver College involves an emphasis on the process of writing in all courses. In workshops and in course clusters faculty members have learned to respond to preliminary drafts of essays. And students now cheerfully recognize that no matter what their major--from anthropology to zoology--they cannot escape from the requirement of submitting drafts for review by their instructor and peers. Students who might have resented their classmates serving as magistrates welcome the explicit responses of peer readers.

Closely related to the Myth of the Magistrate is the Myth of the Martyr. Faculty members who believe that they must grade everything that a student writes are probably the same ones who are inspired by Jonathan Edwards' view of the world and see fiery visions of their students' papers in the hands of an angry teacher. These instructors also believe that it is necessary to suffer in order to teach or learn composition. These conspicuous martyrs can themselves be taught that the teaching of writing will become more productive as it becomes more efficient. They can even be led finally to accept the blasphemy that students can be asked to write a number of things that their instructors don't even have to read. Once again, peer commentary is helpful, as is the opportunity for students to read aloud in class from their own notes in a question. When instructors encourage written responses, not only do students get needed practice in writing, but the class discussion also improves when everyone in the class has reacted to the question in writing.

The above example illustrates one of the most encouraging results of the Beaver program in writing across the curriculum: by focusing on the improvement of writing, faculty members in all departments have actually become better teachers and finally better scholars.

The teaching of writing requires an active involvement of instructor and student in the learning process of each discipline. No longer can Beaver students watch lecturers perform like figures on a television screen. When writing is emphasized in all courses, students cannot passively allege to know things, they have to express what they know first to themselves and then to others. Students have to learn what it means to think and to write in the special ways that humanists, social scientists, and scientists think and write

when they are discovering and communicating ideas in their fields. And we as faculty members are becoming more sensitive to our own similarities and differences as thinkers and writers. We have begun to pose questions about academic discourse and about the nature of evidence in various fields. We have also begun to explore forms of literacy beyond the verbal. At our last workshop, the chairman of our fine arts department asked us to consider the plight of the student whose primary cognitive style was visual rather than verbal. It was during that discussion that I realized that perhaps we had finally broken through the original myths and misconceptions concerning our program of writing across the curriculum. We were no longer talking about grammar across the curriculum, or even about verbal skills across the curriculum, but instead about composition across the curriculum. By composing ourselves into a liberal arts faculty concerned with writing, we had gone beyond writing to a renewed vision of the liberal arts and the fascinating ways that each discipline puts together and expresses that common vision.